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ABSTRACT

Out of the many external forces that influence college campuses, there are four that have had (or are likely to have) a major impact on the fortunes of higher education. The ways in which college and university officials and friends react to these forces can make an enormous difference to the future of higher education. The forces are: (1) Federal Government mandates to conform to new social norms, i.e., affirmative action, elimination of age discrimination, occupational safety and health, minimum wage and fair labor standards, unemployment insurance, social security, health maintenance organizations, Employment Retirement Income Security Act provisions, wage and salary controls, environmental protection, privacy laws, etc.; (2) accountability; (3) the political economy, that is, inflation, unemployment, energy costs, and erratic investment dividends, and (4) impact of public disenchantment with colleges and universities. (Author/KE)

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External Forces Affecting Higher Education

by Stephen K. Bailey

Out of the myriad external forces that swirl around college campuses, there are four that have had (or are likely to have) a major impact on the fortunes of higher education. The ways in which college and university officials and friends react to these forces can make an enormous difference to the future of higher education.

Conforming to New Social Norms

The first force may be labeled "federal government mandates to conform to new social norms." This refers, of course, to the dozen or so federal laws placed on the books in the last several years that attempt to achieve a variety of social ends only marginally related to the educational objectives of colleges and universities: equal employment opportunity, equal pay, affirmative action, elimination of age discrimination, occupational safety and health, minimum wage and fair labor standards, unemployment insurance, social security, health maintenance organizations, Employment Retirement Income Security Act provisions, wage and salary controls, environmental protection, privacy laws, etc.

Carol Van Alstyne and Sharon Coldren of the American Council on Education have been studying the costs to colleges and universities of implementing or conforming to these federally mandated social programs. With the cooperation of six institutions of higher education of various types — granted the primitive state of the art of ferreting or factoring out such costs — the Council's Policy Analysis Service staff has come up with tentative figures that are sobering indeed. If one can extrapolate from this small sample, most colleges and universities in the nation have been forced to dip into reserves or into other sacred pockets in order to meet the rapidly escalating costs of federally mandated programs. Fellowship funds have been robbed, academic priorities have been skewed, dangerously high tuitions have been increased even further. In one large public institution, the annual cost of implementing federally mandated social programs rose in the period 1965-75 from $438,000 to $1,300,000. In one medium-sized private institution, the costs jumped in that same period from $2,000 to $300,000. In a large private institution, the comparable figures skyrocketed from $110,000 in 1965 to $3,600,000 in 1974-75.

Some of these federally mandated social programs have involved a maddening amount of what the Supreme Court in another context has called "entanglements." Affirmative action comes to mind simply because of the recent crisis over Title IX guidelines and regulations, but many of the federal mandates have been accompanied by sheaves of fine print, bales of report forms, and panoplies of inspectors! Here are external forces with a vengeance. And the costs mandated by these external forces are not easily passed on to the educational consumer — or even to hard-pressed state legislatures.

Higher Education Is Not Exempt

What should be our response to these uncomfortable mandates? We could, I suppose, lobby for their elimination — attempting to roll back the clock to the days of our more relaxed ancestral prerogatives. But in our better moments we know that such talk is silly. Among other things, who are we that we should be exempt from the inevitable pains of implementing evolving norms of human equity and dignity? We are a part of the American community — important and integral. We have been quite as guilty as other segments of society in perpetuating evils of caste and class — especially those based on race, sex, and age. And we have no more right to blow up a human being in an unsafe chemistry laboratory than an industry has that right while making munitions in an unsafe factory.

We have every reason to demand that the government be fair, that it follow due process, that it attempt to keep regulations as simple and as unambiguous as possible, and that it put its own chaotic administrative house in order.

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There may be legitimate ways in which to recapture from the government (as industry does) some of the more onerous costs of compliance.

But we are, I believe, constrained to ask ourselves in all candor whether, without the painful prods and ominous threats of the leviathan state, we would voluntarily press, in our proximate settings, to right the wrongs that our democracy has voted to correct. Unless some of us are inconvenienced, unless some of us are administratively anguished, it is probable that the long-standing evils of artificially imposed inequities and indignities on our campuses will be left undisturbed. It is regrettable that financial administrators must absorb so much of the prickly heat. But I am confident that most of you share with me the sense that we are undergoing historically imperative pains of penance, and that the quicker we internalize — and energize with our own initiatives — the cutting-edge norms of social justice which the government is attempting to enforce, the quicker the external armies of bureaucratic meddlers will disappear. "Self-discipline," John Gardner reminds us, "is the yoke of free men."

At its best and most reasonable, accountability is simply the legitimate requirement on the part of those who supply money that it be spent prudently and effectively.

A second external force affecting higher education bears the name "accountability." Accountability is easily caricatured as the meaningless statistics higher education is forced to accumulate in order to quiet some green-eyeshade types in the state capital. Or to mix some generational acronyms: FTE × MBO ÷ usable square footage = FUBAR.

At its best and most reasonable, accountability is simply the legitimate requirement on the part of those who supply money that it be spent prudently and effectively. The crux of the dilemma, of course, is this: How can legitimate canons of accountability be accommodated without upsetting the priceless fragility of academic self-determination? There are times when accountability types remind some of us of curators of Chinese pottery who decide to test the quality of their eggshell vases with a tack hammer. In some states, accountability tack hammers have been written into law.

While it is important to induce college and university administrators to sharpen pencils in the war against institutional waste and inefficiency, it is equally important to recognize the limits of simplistic quantitative analysis addressed to partly ineffable academic outputs. Jack Getzels at the University of Chicago has come forth with a useful example of the difficulty of factoring cost-benefit ratios in academic communities. He points out that a few years ago, a professor of mathematical physics at the University of Chicago commuted seventy miles twice a week in order to teach a graduate course with only two students in it. The cost-benefit ratio, in a superficial sense, was insane: a high-priced professor commuting 140 miles each week to instruct two students. In retrospect, the only mitigating element was the fact that a few years later both graduate students won the Nobel Prize.

The American Council's able senior economist, Carol Van Alstyne, faced with some accountability dilemmas related to the definition of academic productivity, asks the following: If an engineering graduate in 1920 could build a bridge, but an engineering graduate in 1975 can get a man to the moon, has an increase in educational productivity taken place?

The accountability syndrome will not disappear. State legislatures, federal officials, and responsible philanthropoids will continue to press for program audits as well as fiscal audits of their funds. Somewhere between the preciousness of academic rationalizations of inefficiency on the one hand and the unfeeling and almost anti-intellectual line-iteming of academic budgets by bureaucratic and legislative bookkeepers on the other, there is a realm of legitimate autonomy and reasonable surveillance. One of the high callings of a college or university financial administrator is to define that world so that it is acceptable both to academic colleagues and to the institution's financial patrons. No group of people is better suited to perform this essential role of brokering and buffering than you.

Effects of the Political Economy

A third external force is, of course, the inexorabilities of the political economy. Inflation, unemployment, energy costs, and erratic investment dividends have had radical differential effects on institutions of higher education in recent months and years. Few of the effects have been salutary. Some, such as the impact of the cost of #6 fuel oil on colleges in the northeast, have been horrendous. The conclusion is that there is no substitute for navigational virtuosity when sailing on a sea of troubles. In most institutions of higher education the chief business officer, along with the members of investment committees of governing boards, is a key mariner.

I wish that I could be sanguine about the political economy in the years ahead. My fear is that everyone's search

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for short-run advantage will unnerve the collective political conscience. In consequence, everyone will ultimately suffer — especially those who are deserving but who are politically unorganized or inept. In respect to this last point, I think that higher education is making some gains. That we all need to do better — at the state as well as the federal level — is obvious. In the face of powerful, unpredictable, and enigmatic forces in the political economy, political and economic sophistication are the conditions of our survival.

Much can and must be done to overcome and to counteract public disenchantment with higher education when such disenchantment represents an unfair or inaccurate appraisal of reality.

The fourth external force affecting higher education is the most insidious of all. It is the corrosive impact of public disenchantment. Public confidence in colleges and universities and their leadership has dropped a whopping twenty percentage points in six years. It is small comfort to note that public faith in other important institutions in our society has dropped by similar or greater proportions.

Part of the loss of confidence in higher education is a holdover from the campus unrest of the 1960s — perhaps transmogrified into the litigiousness of the present. Part, undoubtedly, is a function of higher costs to parents and students, especially when matched against increasingly uncertain economic and status benefits to degree holders. Part of the problem may well be a cropping up of an anti-intellectual virus that seems to poison the national psyche every few decades — an eruption of a mindless annoyance among noisy segments of the people who are too diverted to think and too lazy to read.

But it is foolish to ignore the possibility that some of the public is justified in its disenchantment, at least in part. Carolyn Bird's book, *The Case Against College,* is annoying because of its inaccuracies and omissions; but it is also saddening because of its accuracies and inclusions. We *have* lost some of our standards — beyond, I believe, the inevitabilities accompanying mass education. More important, we tend to gyrate aimlessly and dangerously between the Scylla of archaic irrelevancy and the Charybdis of instant vocational curricula by market research.

Much can and must be done to overcome and to counteract public disenchantment with higher education when such disenchantment represents an unfair or inaccurate appraisal of reality. Alumni and governing boards especially must be mobilized for this high political purpose. But some honest introspection on the part of administrators, some recommitment to high purpose and high standards, is an essential aspect of winning back public respect and support, which are the touchstones of financial survival. With them, we are assured of continuing legislative and philanthropic underwriting. Without them, we will surely atrophy and die.

I urge you not to lose heart or commitment. I do not know why you chose your occupation. There are surely ways to earn more money at less psychic cost. But my guess is that most of you were drawn to your jobs because you felt somehow a heightened dignity in addressing managerial and financial skills to an enterprise you believed to be significant. Or it may have been nothing more than your desire to raise young children in a university environment. But is this not another way of saying the same thing? Underlying your choice, and your staying with your jobs, is a value preference for institutions whose business is not to produce a commodity, but to induce personal growth and to search for truth.

That such institutions are marked by imperfections, that faculty and student behavior — like the behavior of all persons — is occasionally atrocious, that departmental and divisional conflicts may make the university America's last stronghold of unbridled competitive enterprise, all of these realities may be enough to make you wonder about the worth of it all.

But I would remind you of Winston Churchill's reply to an old lady who in 1942, in the middle of the Battle of Britain, asked the prime minister why Britain fought. Churchill replied, "You'd find out if we stopped."

What if *we* stopped? What if all of our colleges and universities suddenly disappeared? What if they ceased to function altogether?

Dedication Is Essential

At first, little change might be noted. But ultimately doctors would malpractice from ignorance: bridges designed by untutored engineers would collapse; literature and the performing arts would be held to no standards, and would dissolve into globs of jelly; economics would become a broken record of inutile theories; philosophers would play sloppy word games without rules or rigor; astronomy would collapse into the black holes it has only recently discovered. Above all, society would develop a fatal hardening of the arteries for lack of informed and sensitive social criticism. And there would be no specially protected environment friendly to the restless probings of the human mind. It is not too much to say that our stature as humans would be reduced by cubits, for we would no longer be standing on tiptoe trying to touch the face of some beckoning mystery.

Keeping your institutions going may seem in these days a somewhat sullen trade. But without your dedicated attention to the logistics of education, scholars could not search for new knowledge, students could not stretch their minds and hearts, society could not receive the healing, sometimes painful, balm of self-criticism. Ultimately the world could not muster those energies of mind, aesthetic creativity, and examined moral sentiment that are surely its only long-range promise.

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